

## **SWEEPSTAKES -- DON'T PAY TO WIN**

"Congratulations, you have just won a free vacation to the Bahamas. All we need is a credit card verification number, a small handling fee, and the vacation is yours!"

Does this type of phone call sound familiar? Or maybe you've gotten a notice similar to this in the mail. North Dakota residents have been continually bombarded with similar unsolicited prize offers over the past years. In fact, complaints about sweepstakes have been the number one consumer complaint on the North Dakota Attorney General's Top 10 Consumer Complaint List two years in a row. With these types of prize notifications, the consumer ends up paying several hundred dollars for a prize that is either nonexistent or of little value.

Prize offers and sweepstakes that come in the mail or by phone trick you into thinking they are legitimate. Attention-getting gimmicks and rehearsed telemarketing scripts are often used. Look-alike contests and company names also fool consumers. No matter how they are packaged, the offers end up costing you money. Many times, unfortunately, it will cost you a lot of money.

Some promotions use 900 numbers which result in an automatic charge on your phone bill. Others use 800 numbers, but after making the "free" call, consumers find they must pay claim fees, shipping costs, or buy merchandise in order to be eligible for the so-called "prize."

Under North Dakota law, solicitors may not request or accept any payment for prize promotions before they provide you with a written prize notice. And you must sign and return the document before you are obligated to pay any money.

The written notice must contain:

- the company name, address, and telephone number;
- a detailed description of each prize;
- the retail value of each prize;
- the odds of winning each prize;
- the price you must pay -- including shipping and handling;
- any restrictions, limitations, conditions, or eligibility requirements that may apply.

Review the written notice carefully. Does it cost more to get the prize than it's actually worth? This usually will be the case. Pay close attention to the odds. Often, everyone who enters the promotion will receive one prize -- usually something of very little value.

Everyone wants to be a winner. But remember, if you have to pay to win a prize, it isn't much of a prize. The best defense against any phony sweepstakes scam is your common sense. If that dream prize seems too good to be true, it probably is.